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Editorials

Beach Access Ramp Reaffirms What's Good About Duxbury

As the finishing touches are put on the soon-to-be-open handicapped access ramp at Duxbury Beach, it's important to acknowledge what this project says about Duxbury as a community — and the volunteers and staff who brought it to fruition.

Since the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990, public officials everywhere have been ringing their hands over how they would ever comply with it. They saw dollar signs and costly capital improvements over the statute's purpose, which is to guarantee equal access to public programs and services for the nation's disabled populations. Many communities balked at taking the most basic steps, such as preparing transition plans that would help them achieve compliance in an orderly way.

Their resistance has often been explained in terms of cost, when the truth is that ADA never ordered an elevator in every public building and it never said municipalities had to destroy the features of their fine, historic town halls to put up a ramp at every doorway. Another commonly heard excuse: "We don't have any people in wheelchairs trying to use our facilities, so why should we spend a lot of money on access modifications?" Ignorance and fear lie at the root of failure to deal with the civil rights of persons with disabilities.

It is refreshing to see a town tackle ADA compliance with a "can-do" attitude. When town meeting was first asked to appropriate funds for accessibility projects in 1994, voters agreed without complaint. Respect for access in Duxbury has consistently influenced a host of actions in this decade, ranging from moth-balling the Alden School buildings in favor of using Chandler as the early primary school to moving library operations out of a multi-level building that was never designed with an eye toward serving patrons with mobility impairments. Against the backdrop of cutting-edge thinking about handicapped access, the new ramp at Duxbury Beach is almost unsurprising. But that doesn't diminish its importance or the work that went into making it happen.

Most people may not realize it, but Town Manager Rocco Longo brought to Duxbury special talent, knowledge and commitment to the issue of handicapped access. If you add the fact that selectmen created a handicapped commission soon after ADA was passed and appointed a group of caring advocates who quietly but effectively cultivated support for their work, the structure needed to make access a town priority was put in place. Duxbury completed a transition plan long before most (many, many towns still haven't even started this first step in the compliance process), and it didn't stop there. Between the commission's efforts and Longo's sincere interest not merely in compliance, but in the real issue, which is civil rights, Duxbury is now recognized as one of the few places where the legislative intent of ADA is translating into community-based action.

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, June 26, 1996

Harbormaster Don Beers, who never says "no" when a public service problem really needs a "yes," made sure his department mobilized behind making Duxbury's finest gem — the Beach — available to residents whose only way of enjoying the shoreline is to modify the means of access. His executive officer, Peter Smey, and DPW Director Wally Tonaszuck (who also never says "no") worked tirelessly to create plans for an access ramp that meets the design standards of the law and could be built at a reasonable cost. The \$60,000 price tag for this project is being paid by local tax dollars and funds contributed by the Duxbury Beach Reservation. The combined work of outstanding town employees and the handicapped commission, with Longo's dedication and backing, make the new ramp a model of community action. It also makes Duxbury Beach one of a handful of public beaches in Massachusetts that are accessible to persons with disabilities. And it is exactly what the law was designed to accomplish.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, a small corp of Duxbury parents with physically disabled children banded together to teach the public schools how to accommodate these students in educational and co-curricular programs. Their determination, coupled with the extraordinary intelligence and will to experiment that retiring Assistant Superintendent Jim Lyng brought to a long and difficult process, opened Duxbury public school classrooms, services and activities to children whose right to equal educational advantages had been obstructed by a whole host of barriers. Some of the barriers were physical, many more were attitudinal. These people reshaped everything from gym classes to the fifth grade's traditional excursion to Camp Squanto. What they accomplished was amazing at the time.

As the school barriers started coming down, a climate of support for accessibility began to spread, slowly and almost imperceptibly, in this community. The tearing down of physical barriers led to removing programmatic ones. It is why you can walk through the corridors of Duxbury's schools now and see students with all types of disabilities learning alongside, not separate from, children who have no impairments. You may shrug and say, "but that's the law." Well, the same law applies to every other school system, too. But save for a few communities, you will not find Duxbury's scale, quality or "can-do" approach in other Massachusetts public school buildings. Compliance does not happen simply because of legal mandates. It takes advocacy and a will to change on the part of institutions.

Many people active in the issue of handicapped access today will lament that barriers remain, and they should remind us that equal opportunity is an ongoing process. But history offers a context for why things unfold as they do. When officials cut the ribbon for the new ramp at Duxbury Beach, citizens should appreciate that this project did not happen in a vacuum. If memory serves us well, all of the children whose parents were active in the original movement to remove school access barriers for the physically disabled have since died. Most of their families have moved away.